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A
WINTER'S
RIME

A Novel

CAROL DUNBAR

Award-winning author of *The Net Beneath Us*

A WINTER'S RIME

FORGE BOOKS BY CAROL DUNBAR

The Net Beneath Us
A Winter's Rime

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WINTER'S
RIME

CAROL DUNBAR



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This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed
in this novel are either products of the author's imagination
or are used fictitiously.

A WINTER'S RIME

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*People are the miracles that emerge from
the ripped and worn pattern of your life
and help you stitch it back together.*

—Richard Wagamese

For
My Sistas



PART

ONE

During the winter of her twenty-fifth year, Mallory Moe lived in a cabin in the woods with a woman named Andrea and worked overnights at a gas station store. Her shifts at the Speed Stop rotated—1400 until midnight, 2200 until dawn, or 0500 until the middle of the afternoon. She either left in the dark or returned in the dark to walk the dog around the frozen lake. She never knew what day of the week it was, whether morning or afternoon, day or night. She only knew that she needed to avoid being home.

Mallory had never been in a romantic relationship with another woman before, and it had been working out fine, until the government shutdown meant that Andrea was always around. It was a small cabin, a dark winter.

Mallory clipped the leash to the dog and pulled on her gloves, but Andrea had one of those fiddly leashes—a protracting reel with buttons and levers.

“You already walked her this morning,” Andrea said, and Mallory jumped.

“Yeah.” She’d thought that Andrea was on the couch, watching television. “But I’ll just take her out again.”

“She doesn’t need to go out again.”

Baily’s little toenails clicked on the linoleum.

“I think she does,” Mallory said. “I don’t mind.” She bungled through the back door, coat unzipped, hat jammed on her head, the protracting wheel spinning out as Baily zipped down the decking stairs.

When they’d first met, Mallory had been subletting a bedroom in her coworker’s house in the bar district of Sterling, the blue-collar town on the Wisconsin side of the bridge. It had been the easiest

thing, requiring the least amount of effort. But city buses rumbled along, the air smelled of cigarettes, and once, after working all night, Mallory had come home to see a woman peeing on the sidewalk. Her situation now was much better. The only place that made any sense to her was the woods. She needed to live someplace remote, without people and noise, where she could figure out her life. But ever since the government shutdown Andrea had been glued to the TV that blasted sound throughout the house—people gunned down in synagogues, in schools; stories of climate change, the end of life as we know it; bombs exploding in the streets.

Mallory pulled up her hood and stuffed her gloved hands in the pockets of her coat. They headed out down the middle of Riley Ridge Road, paved and plowed, but snow-covered and streaked with sand. From behind them, out on the back deck, the drone of the generator faded. She felt loosed from the center of herself, her muscles corded and tight. Above her a nearly whole moon rose in a sky amply pierced by starlight.

Baily trotted out front, a mystery terrier the size of a fuzzy slipper, with a red sweater and two ears alert on the top of her head. Her claws crepitated on the snowpack, collar jingling in the icy air. Usually they went about half a mile, until the road branched off and met up with another one. Normally, before the shutdown, Mallory would turn them around at that point to go back to the cabin, where it was warm. But lately, she'd been taking that branch because it looped around the lake, and sometimes, she lingered in front of the house of Landon James.

Landon, the only other full-time resident that winter at Mire Lake, split his own firewood and drove a banana-yellow truck. His house sat by the side of the road that looped around the lake, more than a mile and a half away. Once a week he came into the Speed Stop for his generator fuel and often the two of them would talk.

Mallory slowed and held out her hand. The last of a snowfall meandered down. Flakes tumbling out from a clear night sky glinted uncertainly, directionless, now that the source that had created them had moved on.

The last time Mallory had seen her sister and mom, they'd had a fight. That had been four years ago, the month before Mallory shipped out to Kuwait. She'd served a total of seven years in the army, joining at the age of eighteen, and that June she had come home. No one had been there. Her sister Laurel was living with their mom in Upstate New York and attending a private university. Her dad was someplace in the desert looking for Jesus. Mallory had been back six months—no, seven months now, she realized—but she still hadn't talked to any of them.

She veered to the right, taking the loop around the lake. Her boots creaked across the snowpack. She was not going to be one of those people who blamed every bad thing that happened to them on their parents. It wasn't their fault she didn't feel safe. It wasn't their fault she could never afford a place like this on her own. And anyway, things with Andrea weren't that bad.

"Once upon a time in the deepest darkest woods," her mother used to say, when she and her sister were young, and they would squeal with delight, beg her to tell them the deepest darkest bedtime stories. But those stories were just for fun. The people in them didn't act upon their deepest darkest thoughts, things always worked out, and nobody got hurt. They worried about things, what they feared they or others might do. But those things were never done. So, what scared them, then, what they only ever truly feared, was in the deepest darkest parts of their minds. It didn't get let out because it was never real.

Or it was never real because it didn't get let out.

That winter during her twenty-fifth year, something had been let out. Mallory could feel it in her gut, a disturbance that wouldn't go away. She heard about it from the news stories on the television that relentlessly played. People were acting on their darkest thoughts and doing things that, previously, they would never have done.

Mallory didn't know how to talk to Andrea about what was going on between them. She didn't know how to explain it, other than to say that it was her fault. Something was wrong with her—a character defect, a moral weakness. She wasn't just afraid of what Andrea

would do; Mallory had begun to fear *who she was* whenever the two of them were alone. Images flashed through her head—memories, arguments, loud percussive sounds, and, more recently, her fight with Andrea.

They came fast around the bend, Baily leading the way, with the frozen lake to their left and the light of Landon's cabin straight ahead. Snow piled thick on his roof, his generator silent. A column of chimney smoke rose straight into the frigid air.

The brash, throaty bark of a dog broke into the night. Mallory startled and jumped, flinging out both hands and losing the leash. She dipped and picked it up, scooping little Baily into her arms and bringing her up to her chest.

"Shh shh, girl, it's all right," Mallory said, whispering into the dog's ear. It was Landon's German shepherd barking outside, a large dog that was never on a leash, and although she didn't think he would hurt Baily, Mallory didn't want her to be afraid. The little dog shivered and whimpered in her arms. The sound of the barking whipcracked through the night.

"Odin! Get back here! Odin!" Landon called from inside his house, the light from his open back door splashing into the woods. He was a hundred feet away, but in the cold stillness it sounded as though he were right there. Mallory lifted her face. "That's a good boy," he said to his dog. A hundred points of touch tingled in the soft skin under Mallory's chin. "Back inside now, old friend. There you go. That's a good dog."

Tingles rippling under her jaw as if feathers stroked her there, and her face softened, her eyes closed. The air seemed to bloom with the scent of fresh bread, and it made her want to cry, this feeling. Landon wasn't baking bread—unless of course he was. But she always got *the feeling*, as she called it, whenever she heard his voice. It was just the way her brain worked. Some voices didn't affect her—she felt nothing and didn't know why. Other voices came on so strong they activated multiple senses at once, like the wires of her brain had gotten crossed somehow. They had a name for it: auditory-tactile synesthesia. Sound touched her skin.

Her grandfather had been the one who explained it to her. He had synesthesia, too, after he came back from the war. She had his name, Mallory. German for “war counselor,” French for “unlucky one.”

From behind Landon’s house came the soft thump of a closing door. Mallory opened her eyes. With Landon, it was more than just *the feeling*. It was the way he said things, the kindness in his voice. She had never heard a man talk the way he did.

It had stopped snowing.

Baily wriggled in her arms and Mallory set her back down.

“What is it, Baily Bales?”

The little dog stood alert and questioning at the end of her leash.

“Did that scare you?” Mallory asked, removing a glove. “Are you cold? We should go.” The lever on the protracting reel had gotten stuck, and the little dog watched, then yanked the leash, slipping it from Mallory’s grip as she wickedly ran off.

“You little shit!” Mallory hissed under her breath. The clunky protracting reel bounced out along the white tongue of the road and Mallory launched into a run, her hood falling back, the ends of her bloodred hair bouncing under a black beanie hat.



The loop ended when it met back up with Riley Ridge Road, and Mallory could no longer see Baily. She heard the little dog barking, the splinters of sound echoing in the night. Mallory jogged to the left instead of going right, which would have taken them back to the cabin. Up ahead in the moonlight, the silhouette of Baily quivered.

Car parts scattered across the road caught Mallory’s attention first. Particles of iridescence shimmered over the broken bits—reflector lights, plastic bumper shards. “You are a bad dog.” Mallory dipped and swiped up the leash, breathing hard, lungs burning from the cold. The breath vapors rising from her mouth had formed ice in her lashes and brows. Baily yipped and hopped, hoarfrost clinging to the fur around her face.

A large brown mass lay across the road. A stillborn silence hung

over the scene. Mallory never saw other cars out this far, out past the lake, and she'd never been on this section of Riley Ridge Road. This area was remote, Mire Lake not connected to the grid. Was somebody else staying there? Maybe for the weekend?

She wondered this, but it was only a fleeting thought. The deer was still breathing. A doe gurgling blood, eyes two glimmering slits. The muscle of her tongue hung limp and helpless from the side of her mouth, the fumes of her breath weakly white and forming tiny fronds of ice. Her legs were tangled below her body, disfigured with planks of protruding bone, the hooves shiny as summer plums.

A jolt fired through Mallory's body.

The memory played involuntarily in her head, a memory from childhood, and she could hear him and smell him like he was there. "Come on then," Dad said, home from Iraq for the holidays. "You want to go hunting so bad, wake up your sister up and get dressed." He moved through the dark of the house with a headlamp strapped to his head, his body lean and fit. She always admired the decisiveness of his movements, coiled and crisp. Whenever he did something, he did it right, and if he said he'd do something, it got done.

Laurel was eight then, which made Mallory twelve, although both girls were the same height. Bits of cereal still floated in their bowls as they hurried out to their father's waiting truck, rifles slung across their backs, exhaust curdling in the night.

They parked on the side of a county road and trekked out to the deer blind. Two sisters bundled together in a predawn stillness, crouched in a cheek-to-stock weld. Mallory wore an eye patch, a present from her father, to help align her sight—she never could wink or close just one eye. A slow-motion snow fell, the flakes tiny and iridescent in the limpid air. A quiet so still, she could hear the snow land with faint *tick-ticks* on the scraps of dried leaves.

A deer stepped timidly into the clearing.

Slender ears twitched and turned, she stepped forward, and in that movement, as if by secret signal, two smaller deer followed, creeping out from the duff. A mother and her young.

One for each of us, her father's look said.

The crack of gunshot. The blood invading snow. Mallory hadn't even known she was screaming until her sister punched her in the chest. "You ruined it, Mallory!" she said. "Why do you always have to ruin everything!"

Back on Riley Ridge Road, Mallory climbed over the crest of snow plowed in the ditch to tie the little dog to a tree. Taking a knee close behind the deer, she removed a glove, and sliding the knife from her boot, she thrust it quick and deep into the throat, wrenching it crosswise until two fountains of blood drained and light faded from the doe's eyes. Then, placing a thumb on the smooth plank of the glabella, she offered up an acknowledgment to the spirit passing, the way her friend Ottara had taught her when they served together in Kuwait.

She had cried all weekend after that hunt with her dad, not coming out of her room, staying in bed. She hadn't understood it, what hunting required. She'd begged to go because she wanted to be part of things, to have an experience with her dad, but it had devastated her, the thought of those two motherless deer. They'd tracked that mother doe for hours, her dad's bullet missing the lungs because she had cried and always, she cried. She was too sensitive, everyone said.

Wiping the blade clean, Mallory replaced her glove and stood. Breath vapors fumed around her face and she could smell herself—fight or flight, the scent of fear. It was an odor that had followed her from childhood, a smell that was real and pungent and able—somehow—to escape the mask of deodorant. She kicked at the car parts, knocking them off the side of the road. Her breath came shallow and fast, and saliva coated her tongue with the viscosity of blood.

"Tell her to quit being a pussy." She'd heard them arguing about her, later that night, her dad's voice coming through the thin bedroom walls. "She's weak," he said. "No mental fortitude." Venison was good meat, and deer were rats on legs.

A front bumper, the socket of a headlight, and what looked like the gray cover to a side fender—those she picked up and hauled off, tossing them into the woods.

The deer lay with her head facing the trees. Mallory lifted the back

legs and pulled. The joints popped, part of the body stuck to the road. She yanked harder, ripping the fur as she tore it from the frozen ground. Walking backwards and averting her eyes, she dragged the deer, leaving behind a slick smear, the slosh and gurgle of fluids and the rank smell. She pulled it onto the snow piled in the ditch off the side of the road and left it there to get picked at by the crows.

2

One of the first Speed Stops to open had been in Mallory's hometown of Sanders, Wisconsin. Besides selling gasoline and potato chips, they also kept the store stocked with yogurt and onions and containers of cut-up fruit—honeydew, cantaloupe, grapes. They had restrooms with stalls that had real doors that closed all the way and actual doorknobs, divided by solid brick walls. Her sister, Laurel, had called them “apartments,” and whenever they went in next to each other, they had pretended that they were living together and going to college, giggling while they peed.

Mom had taken them to the Speed Stop on the nights when she didn't work and Dad was deployed. “Let's go get shakes,” she'd say, grabbing the keys. Her mom was different when Dad was overseas. They'd drive to the rural Speed Stop off the main highway that shot through their small town and gather around the new, state-of-the-art machine. Her mom watched as it churned the ice cream—you could choose your favorite flavors, add toppings like “whip.”

Her mom wearing denim and sneakers, black kohl drawn carefully around her small hazel eyes—people always said they looked alike. Her mom had her girls when she was very young and was only five one. People always thought they were sisters. Three sisters, going out.

Mallory thought of her mom whenever she looked in the mirror, or smelled cotton candy, or saw other moms and daughters at the Speed Stop store. They were all over the place now.

Mallory pulled into the parking lot of the Speed Stop nearest Mire Lake, only thirty miles west of the town where she grew up. She talked to Noah while hauling out the freezer tote.

“Did you hear about that man at the Mall of America who threw

a little kid over the third-floor guardrail?” Wearing her black work pants and a blue smock, she took out the plain cake doughnuts and lined them up in rows across a wax paper-lined tray. “The fall broke nearly every bone in the boy’s face. And this man knew he would do it. He told the police that he *came* to the mall that day *looking* for someone to kill.”

Noah Quakenbush, who worked with Mallory at the Speed Stop and was something of a genius, said that if you studied history, you knew things had always been this bad.

“We just didn’t know it then,” he said from the kitchen. “Now we have Internet, so we hear about everything.” He wore a snug black hairnet over his acorn-shaped head, and Smurf-blue gloves. He set a timer for the oven and lined frozen puck patties across his industrial tray. It was easy for her to be around Noah—his voice had no effect on her skin. “Plus, there’s the added problem of fake news, so you don’t even know what’s true anymore.” He smiled, pushing his glasses up higher on his nose. Whenever he gestured, he did so smoothly, and he always kept the same pace, a relaxed gait with no sudden moves. He lacked the ability to hustle—something Mallory found comforting. Noah would have been a disaster in the military.

The kitchen filled with the smell of sizzling meat. Smells, to her, were a gift; they mitigated the effect of uncomfortable sounds on her skin. That plus earplugs was how she survived her time in the service, and why she worked that winter at the Speed Stop store—they all had bakeries and kitchens and brewed coffee twenty-four seven.

“Why doesn’t anyone ever make fake news about good things?” She pummeled the clear plastic bag to make the icing mix and did a mock reporter voice: “Scientists find that penguins on the north pole are actually mating at twice the normal rates, populations are thriving, and their chicks are somehow learning to fly.”

“Penguins only live at the south pole,” Noah informed her. “And they can fly, through water. They have incredibly strong pectoral muscles and streamlined bodies.”

“Thank you for the lesson in zoology.” She snipped off the corner

of the plastic bag and zigzagged icing across the doughnut tops. She dealt with bakery because the person who usually did it was out on medical leave.

“Gentoo penguins leap out of the water like porpoises,” he added helpfully.

They talked together in the kitchen, and they talked all night over their headsets, especially during the dead zone between 0200 and 0330, when all the cops and truckers had gone—when all of life seemed suspended and they were the only two people in the world. Of course, Noah explained what dead zones really were: hypoxic zones in the earth’s water systems that could no longer support life. And how those zones were expanding.

“Jesus, Noah. Don’t you have any good news for me?”

“On Sunday there’s going to be an eclipse of a blood moon.”

The oven timer went off and Noah picked up the giant silver tongs and removed the industrial tray. Landon James had invited Mallory to a bonfire on the night of the blood moon.

“What day is it today?” she asked.

“Friday.”

“Already?”

“When we started the shift, it was only Thursday.” He set down the industrial tray. “You have to let those thaw first.”

“What?”

“The doughnuts. Before you decorate them. They’re going to expand as they warm and that will displace the icing.” He picked up a platter of wrapped sausage biscuit sandwiches and disappeared through the swinging kitchen door.

Mallory looked at her doughnuts, covered now in sprinkles and already a glopping mess. The cakey sides were expanding, like they were breathing.

“Jesus, Noah,” she said into the headset. “Why didn’t you tell me this?”

“I was afraid you’d get mad.”

“But they’re already decorated!” She did sound mad.

“I thought you knew. You’re the guest service leader.”

Mallory flung the frosting bag and dropped to the floor, doing a set of push-ups there in the kitchen of the Speed Stop store. Nose to the ground, legs out straight, and her body a plank, she snorted out breath in percussive bursts.

Noah returned with his empty tray and dealt out slices of ducky yellow cheese.

“Statistically speaking,” Noah said, while she did her push-ups, “good news doesn’t get shared as much as bad.” He made the sandwiches for the Hot Spot, a heated window filled with wax paper bundles of salty, cheesy food—breadsticks, burgers, and sausage croissants. “Bots spread fake news and real news equally across the web, whereas humans share fake news at an alarming rate, almost three times more. It’s a proven fact.” He pushed his glasses up higher on his nose. “Probably, I’m guessing, because it’s titillating.”

Noah wore thick-framed glasses and had taken all the AP classes at his school. He scored a 35 on his ACT, which is nearly perfect and could have gotten him into MIT. Instead, he worked with her at a rural Speed Stop as cashier/janitor/stocker/kitchen custodian earning twelve dollars an hour in a bizarrely overenthusiastic company culture with an obsessive adoration for the founding family—despite the fact that they were systematically wiping out all the mom-and-pop gas stations across the state. He did this because his mom was sick. He lived with her and paid the bills, kept the lights on and cupboards stocked while also taking classes at the state U.

Her mom didn’t even know she was back from Kuwait. Mallory got to her feet, tossed the doughnuts in the trash, and went back to the cooler to haul out another batch.



Landon James had come in earlier that week for his generator fuel. His truck had alighted at the pumps like a bright-feathered bird, and she’d twittered into the microphone, “Go ahead on pump three.” For the suggestive sale, she’d dropped to her lower register, the one she reserved for hot guys in dimly lit bars. “Be sure to visit our Hot Spot, where we have pepperoni pizza on sale, tonight only, for \$7.99.”

Outside, Landon moved like a much younger man, his muscles rangy and his frame slight as a college boy. A photographer who freelanced for *National Geographic*, it wasn't that she had a crush on him—he was old enough to be her dad. Landon scurried and hunched, lugging out the fuel cans from his flatbed and filling them up.

"There's going to be a super blood wolf moon on Sunday," he said, when he came up to her register to pay. "Have you heard?"

She cracked a smile and weighed his spuds, ringing them up at thirty-nine cents a pound. "You're kidding," she said. "Super blood? Wolf moon? Sounds like a werewolf comic book strip."

"Yeah, it could be," he laughed, reaching back for his wallet. Landon was old school; he paid with cash. "Apparently a wolf moon is the first full moon in January."

"That so?" She gave him his change. "Only in January?"

"Only then."

She tenderly placed his bananas in a shopping bag. "What about the blood thing," she said. "What does that mean?"

"That one's a bit more on the nose. It's a full eclipse where the moon turns red. You'll be able to see it on Sunday around eleven at night. I'm having a bonfire with a few of my friends. You should come. Bring Andrea and some chairs, or pull up a stump."

She told him that she probably had to work that night and gave him his grocery bag. He left, but all she could think about was how she wanted to go to that bonfire. She wanted to sit outside under the light of the full moon and listen to Landon talk with his friends. It wasn't just the sound of his voice or because he was from California, with the rugged good looks outdoorsy men get when they age. It was the way he said "At any rate" to transition out of awkward moments, whenever he felt the attention too focused on himself. It was how the word "absurd" buzzed sophisticatedly on his lips—a windchill of forty below, "Absurd"; his nephew who warmed up pizza on the dashboard heater of his truck, "Absurd!" How when he smiled, his weather-beaten face crinkled and lit up like a meadow in summer.

She hadn't been this interested in someone from the male species in ten years. He didn't have that cavernous look so many of the boys

she'd grown up with had; he wasn't wounded in the deepest, darkest parts of his soul. Andrea said the fact that he was fifty and living out here alone meant that something was wrong with him. But when he said her name, a warmth rose in her that made her want to, she didn't know, save him from that loneliness?

Which was absurd, considering that this winter she couldn't even save herself.



Friday morning, Mallory came home from work and clipped the leash onto Baily for another three-mile walk. She kept her head down, hood up, and hands in the pockets of her coat. A winter rhythm beat inside her head: *boots and breath and boots and breath*. Her clothes smelled of beef burrito from working all night, and the cold ached through the tops of her thighs, but she didn't want to go home. Above them, halos of icy droplets encircled a nearly full moon in a double corona of yellow and blue. It shone down unblinking from a diaphanous sky and gleamed across planes of untouched snow.

All growing up, the woods had been her safe haven, a quiet place where she could go to recover some part of herself whenever her parents fought. She noticed the way nature handled adversity; how the trees bent under the weight of snow, making graceful arches and boughs; how the little birds fluffed up and huddled in the brutal cold. Mallory had spent an entire childhood avoiding home, and now that feeling had followed her here, to her adult life, and she wanted it to be some else's fault.

That night back in November when she and Andrea had that fight, it had been because of a bonfire at Landon's house. They had gone together but left at different times, Mallory staying after Andrea had gone home. That fight had gotten violent. Now she wanted to go to another bonfire. Mallory knew that she shouldn't go. She knew this: she should *not* go.

And yet she also knew that she probably would.

Something in her veered toward the reckless. An impulse to just

do things. Her body moving out ahead of her thoughts to make things happen, make things different. Maybe, like Andrea, she was addicted to drama and needed to be in control. Maybe she really did have ADHD, like her teacher and therapist had said. Or maybe she wanted to feel the pain, wanted to get hurt.

Mallory stopped in the middle of the road. The leash went slack as the little dog Baily sat. Landon's chimney puffed shreds of smoke and the pines near his house stood like wardens all around.

She could picture him in there, in his kitchen, back where the light shone. It was the only part of the house that she'd seen other than the bathroom. She waited for a glimpse of movement behind the window blinds, the flutter of a shadow, a figure rising from the chair. Landon didn't watch television—he read books. He also cooked—scrambled eggs with vegetables served on a thick crockery plate, Mallory felt sure. She could picture him in there making breakfast, the gentle scuff of his slippers against the worn linoleum floor; how he would reach down and gently rub his dog, saying something encouraging; the scent of coffee drifting out. Holding herself there, erect and watching from the middle of the street, her face hidden under her hood, Mallory felt separate from the warmth of that house. She kept herself apart from it because that house and the kinds of things in it were unattainable, not meant for her. She believed this, privately, unconsciously. She had decided that she belonged on the outside of the life she really wanted, unable to let herself in.

Back at the cabin she hung up the dog leash and slid the knife out of her boot, placing it in the duffel bag, under her clothes. In the living room, she did a series of sit-ups on the floor, arms crossed, elbows twisting to her knees, before slipping into bed next to Andrea. The sun refused to appear, the clouds clearing only at night. Dawn prodded at the horizon as though lifting a heavy lid, and morning came gray and feckless through the trees.

3

The voice woke her later that day.
“Mallory,” it said.

Fifty-seven hours before the night of the blood moon.

She came to, pulled from sleep. Red sheets over the windows swelled with crimson light, and the sound of a woman’s voice droned from the living room. Andrea maintaining her vigilance by the TV. She had tacked maroon sheets over the bedroom windows so that Mallory could sleep during the day. Whenever the sun came out from behind the clouds, they glowed bloodred.

“You wouldn’t think this kind of thing could happen out here, in a place of such wilderness and beauty,” the voice on the television said, *“but it’s happening everywhere, in both urban and rural communities.”* The news story drifted through the bedroom walls. Mallory wore earplugs so she could sleep during the day, but one of them had fallen out. *“Some of these girls are as young as eleven years old.”* The light went out, blocked by clouds, and the sheets fell dark. Mallory lay back on the pillow. It was an older woman’s voice. *“Missing girls, invisible girls.”* She sounded solemn, concerned. Mallory drifted back to sleep.

“Mallory!” The voice called her again.

“Andrea!” Mallory called back. She thought it was Andrea calling her, and she wanted to go back to sleep. A high-pitched ringing landed in her ear, shrill and exact. *“They’re seen as teen prostitutes and not as victims. They’re considered bad girls, dirty girls.”* The ringing crescendoed, the curtain glowed bright red.

“Did you need something?”

Mallory jumped as if she’d been electrocuted in bed. Her arms spasmed and twitched and everywhere her skin tingled and itched. Andrea stood in the doorway and smirked.

“Didn’t mean to startle you awake.” Her bangs fell over to one side, coal black and frosted lavender to bring out the violet in her large, distrustful eyes. The other side she kept shaved close to her head, revealing planes of alabaster cheekbones high and sharp.

“Why are you calling me?” Mallory said.

“I didn’t call you. You called me.”

The voice had been a man’s, Mallory realized, hearing it on replay from memory inside her head. The ringing in her ear waned but didn’t go away. She gave up trying to sleep and got out of bed. Wearing shorts and a tank top, she dug through the duffel bag on the floor, which served as her clothes bureau.

“What are these red bumps all over your skin?” Andrea reached out to trace them with her fingertips.

Mallory flinched. “Nothing.” The tiny bumps had spread like ants from her stomach to her back and all along the tops of her thighs. “I just get hives sometimes.” She got them whenever she was stressed. “Have you seen my work pants?”

“Laundry room.”

Jeans were forbidden at the Speed Stop, and the black pants made for women didn’t have pockets deep enough to hide a phone, so she wore men’s pants with long black sweaters or cardigans that hung down. Mallory tugged on socks and padded into the laundry room. The voice had been a man’s, so it must have come from a dream, she thought, digging through another pile of clothes, this one on the floor in front of the clothes dryer.

“Did you have another bad dream?”

Mallory jumped and banged her knee on the open dryer door. “Jesus, Andrea. Why do you keep doing that?” She swatted the door closed.

“I walked into a room. Don’t make that my fault.” Andrea used to do the laundry for her when she first moved in—before they had that fight about Landon James. Now Mallory was being punished. “This isn’t healthy, you always on edge.” Andrea’s breath shoaled across Mallory’s bare skin. “I think you should see my therapist.” She gently moved Mallory’s hair out of her face. “I’ll pay for it. Someone has to take care of the little cowbird.”

The sound of her rich, cello voice erupted into a delirium of tingles against Mallory's cheeks, and it did this even when fingers weren't near her face. Mallory had once thought that she would do anything for Andrea because of that voice. She thought Andrea was better than her, educated and with a degree in chemistry, a minor in biology. She'd studied ornithology and said that Mallory was like a cowbird because she didn't have a stable family home. Cowbird mothers left their eggs in the nests of other birds because they didn't have the resources to properly care for their brood. That had shamed Mallory. She hated the way Andrea crowed and criticized her parents, and now Mallory wished she had never told Andrea anything about her life.

"No thanks." Mallory put on a cardigan to cover up the hives. Her pulse quickened, she could feel it throbbing against the skin of her neck, her armpits sticky and hot despite the goose bumps on her flesh.

"I was thinking about making lasagna tonight," Andrea said, which meant she would unwrap a frozen package that was vegan and gluten-free, then sprinkle it with cayenne pepper. "You like that, right?" Andrea thought she had to be mothering, but it didn't come naturally to her, and technically it wasn't accurate to call Mallory a cowbird. Her mom hadn't left until Mallory did.

"Sure. Whatever. You know I'm not picky." The ringing in her head had cut out. The voice hadn't felt like it came from a dream, or in her head, but it wasn't from the television either. She shook out her work clothes, the entire load covered in dog hair because Andrea had dumped it out onto the floor. Last week, Mallory had come home to find a load of her clothes tossed outside and furred over with snow. "You know," Mallory said now, feeling her heart beat harder in her chest, "it's not that hard to put my clean clothes on the bed."

"It's not that hard to walk into the laundry room and get them out of the dryer yourself."

Hearing the word "walk," Baily lifted her head.

"You next," Mallory said.

"She doesn't need to go out again," Andrea said.

Mallory could smell herself, the scent of fight-or-flight, the scent of fear, and it was stupid, she told herself. Why should she be afraid? Mallory knew that, physically, she was the stronger one.

"Is that it then?" Andrea said, still looming over her. "You're not going to talk to me?"

"It's not you."

"What is it then?"

Mallory braced herself. It was Andrea's house, Andrea's washing machine and dryer. Even half the clothes piled on the floor Andrea had bought for her at the mall, like the expensive lacy underwear. "She didn't have stuff like this growing up," Andrea had said to the salesclerk when paying. "She still wears Fruit of the Loom." Always getting in a cutting remark, even when she was being nice. Mallory didn't feel it. She'd let herself go numb. And anyway, things weren't that bad and soon the shutdown would end.

She leaned in and gave Andrea a kiss.

Before she could pull away, Andrea bit her hard on the lower lip.

Reflexively, Mallory raised a fist. Andrea caught it, held it in mid-air. Their arms tensed and eyes locked. Mallory had a temper, and Andrea was testing her, egging her on; a dark gleefulness played in her violet eyes. Metal zippers clicked and scratched inside the dryer drum and static crackled in the air. Mallory weakened even as she tasted her own blood.

"Pathetic," Andrea said, dropping Mallory's arm.

"These girls are particularly vulnerable to predators because of their history of trauma and abuse."

Andrea went back to the couch in front of the flat-screen, wide as a coffee table and taking up one whole wall of the living room. Wireless speakers mounted in the corners of a high-beamed ceiling pumped sound throughout the house.

"In most cases these girls believe that they have a boyfriend, that they're in love."

Even with the zippers ticking round and round, Mallory could still hear the TV.

“That’s what makes it so hard for them to get out, because they don’t have, in many cases, a stable family situation to go back to, and so the first time it happens, they don’t even believe that’s what’s going on.” Suddenly Mallory realized what she’d been listening to, her body flooding with nausea and heat. A roaring filled her head.

She marched out to the living room, punched the power button on the side of the flat-screen, and killed the TV.

“Hey!” Andrea barked. “What the hell did you do that for?”

Head down, hiding her face behind her hair, Mallory went back to the laundry room and shut and locked the door. Pulling down the box of Bounce dryer sheets, she pressed several to her face, closed her eyes, and sank to the floor, inhaling the heady scent.

“Mallory!” Andrea squawked from the couch. “Mallory!”

Andrea that winter had just turned forty. The summer they met, her house in Duluth had been vandalized, robbed, all her stereo equipment stolen. Whoever did it had urinated on the bed. And that was the part that disturbed Andrea the most, that haunted the darkest part of her mind.

“Mallory?” she called again. And Mallory wanted to reply, she wanted to feel close to Andrea again, wanted to be emotionally stable and worthy of all the things Andrea had done for her, wanted most of all to understand what was going on. Sweat pooled in her armpits and glazed the crevices of her neck. She didn’t know how to explain it, why she felt so keyed up and displaced. When they said each other’s names, that was supposed to be a call to presence, a self-awareness exercise Andrea’s therapist had taught her so that they could learn how to better communicate their feelings. They had a lot of feelings that winter, both of them did, and that was always the problem.

Mallory never knew where to put them.

Tossing aside the dryer sheets, she got to her feet. Jumping up, she fell into a squat, knees on the outside of her elbows, then shot back

into a plank, did a push-up, then sprang into another jump. Without speaking, without thinking, Mallory pushed out the memories with the burn of muscle pain, doing a set of thirty-five burpees there on the laundry room floor.



Mallory and Andrea had met that June at a Speed Stop in Sterling, a port city with an oil refinery, sprawled on the northwest coast of Wisconsin.

“Do you have these in gluten-free?” It was the sound of her voice. It gave Mallory *the feeling*. A delectation of shivers rose through her cheeks and weakened her knees.

“We might have some in the back.”

“Those are exceptionally straight bananas.”

Mallory looked down at the bananas she was unloading from a box.

“So, would you mind checking for me?” The woman’s hair was bluish black and cut artfully short, fringing elegant bone structure and a Grecian nose. On the ends of her fingers, black nail polish shone.

“Yeah, I can do that.” Mallory didn’t smile or engage. Her own body blunt and square, with the fit posture of ex-military, she continued to unload the exceptionally straight bananas from their box.

“That’d be real nice of you.” That rich, deep voice, with just the hint of a snag at the back of the throat—it buzzed pleasantly in Mallory’s cheeks and made her mouth water, not from hunger but from a sudden flushing of saliva in the space between her molars and cheeks.

“Don’t get your hopes up.” Mallory flicked the stepladder closed and hauled away the empty box. The sound of Andrea’s voice tingled a certain way, just like the voice of Jarrod, her boyfriend from high school. She had grown up with him in Sanders—they had known each other since they were just kids—and the way his voice had stroked her cheeks, like the tickling of a cat’s tongue, felt so much

like Andrea's. It was impossible to overestimate just how dopey she could get from the sound of a voice. In the kitchen she inhaled several lungfuls of waffle batter and then stepped back out through the swinging doors.

"Here you go." She handed over the bubbled six-pack of gluten-free muffins in its bakery box.

"Well, aren't you sweet." Clearly the woman was being sarcastic, but also flirtatious at the same time. "Where did you come from?" the woman asked.

"I'm from here."

"I've never seen you before. I'm the Muffin Monday Lady."

"Congratulations."

"Want to get some coffee sometime?"

It took Mallory so much by surprise that she said, "Sure."



In July, they met at an outdoor rifle range off County Road Z, twenty miles southeast of Sterling. Mallory stopped by the storage facility where she'd stowed her things while overseas and arrived with a duffel of rifles slung over one arm. Andrea worked at a water testing lab in Duluth, on the Minnesota side of the bridge, and played saxophone in a jazz band. After the change in administration and her house being broken into, she'd gotten her own gun. They shot at paper targets from high wood tables and later moved to their stomachs out on the grass, propping their weapons with sandbags. The sound of their gunfire popped against Mallory's thighs like hot-oiled kernels of corn, but Mallory was used to it by then and wore earplugs inside her hearing protection.

"Did you enjoy that?" Andrea asked as she cleaned out her gun with her slender, jazz-playing hands.

"Yeah." It was Mallory's habit to lie and then feel bad. But she'd decided on the flight home from Kuwait that she would be more conscious of this and stop lying by default. She raised her eyes, the temperature cooling off now as the sun dropped below the tree line. "Actually, guns aren't really my thing. I'd rather shoot photographs."

Andrea had looked at her.

"These belonged to my grandpa. He was a fighter pilot during World War II." Mallory zipped the sides of her duffel closed. "He taught me how to make the world's fastest paper plane."

"Are you a fighter pilot?"

"No. I didn't see much combat in Kuwait."

"What did you do?"

"Mechanic."

Andrea's nose twitched like it'd caught a whiff of allergen. "You must have gotten a lot of attention from the guys."

"Not in a bad way. They were like my brothers."

"Yeah, I got one of those." Andrea also came from a dysfunctional family, but hers had money and was from Chicago. She screwed on the cap to her vitamin water and rolled up her sleeves. Both arms were tattooed with angels clad in battle armor, wings with shining swords. The artwork, in its realism, reminded Mallory of her grandfather's tattoo—a black raven inked across his chest.

"Do you believe?" Andrea said, noticing where her gaze went.

"In what?"

"Angels."

She looked away. The fuchsia in the sky bled through the trees. I wanted to. "My parents were religious; we went to church all the time. But it seemed like hypocrisy to do whatever you want, knowing that, as long as you go to church and pray, you'll be forgiven."

"You don't believe in forgiveness?"

The conversation was making her uncomfortable. "Do you?"

"I have to. Forgiveness isn't about them, it's about you." It was one of the first of many profound things that Andrea would say, and Mallory had been attracted to that, to the idea of becoming more evolved. "I believe in angels because they're available to everybody," Andrea explained. "People get them mixed up all the time with their religious propaganda, but angels are older than religion. They've got nothing to do with Christianity or churches or man-made rules. They are their own powerful beings." She wriggled her nose. "Why do you smell so good? What is that—vanilla?"

Mallory nosed the black sweatshirt she wore to work. “Oh, sorry,” she said. “It’s cappuccino powder. From the machine at work. I changed the powders out today.”

“Bonus.” Andrea leaned over and inhaled. “Yum.” She smiled. She was older than Mallory had originally thought, but she was lonely, and the angels had seemed like a sign.



In August, when they drove out to the cabin at Mire Lake, Andrea told her, “I’m thinking of moving out here full-time.” An excited Baily danced on her lap. It was hot, and Andrea drove a Prius, unselfconscious about the way her dress rode up, exposing the pillars of her thighs. When they arrived and the hybrid engine eerily turned off, Andrea’s voice lodged itself in the pouches of Mallory’s cheeks. “Ever since the Carrot got elected and my place got robbed, I don’t trust anybody,” Andrea said. “Plus, all this drama with the band—the budget cuts to the EPA mean none of us knows if we’ll still have a job in six months. So we’re taking a break.” Mallory had never known a woman who played in a band or owned a second home, let alone a first. “Don’t be too impressed,” Andrea had said. “I bought it for the woods.”

The woods had always been Mallory’s favorite place. The town of Sanders bordered a national forest, but the woods of Mire Lake were the same—maple, popple, birch, and within an hour’s proximity to the Great Lake. Once the sacred ground of the Ojibwa tribes, a place where food grew on water, Mire Lake was now a wilderness area with hiking paths and off-grid cabins tucked back on ten-acre lots, where hunters went to shoot deer and bear with their hound dogs and bait. Andrea strode up the cedar decking in her beaded sandals, pulled on the cord of a Honda generator, plugged in an extension cord, and invited Mallory in. A toaster oven sat out on the counter, a gas fireplace sparked with the turn of a switch, and raked windows offered views of the trees—the place so remote no curtains were needed.

Immediately, Mallory felt at home.

That fall a rafter of turkeys came to roost in the woods behind the

house. At dusk they flew up into the trees in twos and threes to tuck in for the night, their chortles and coos echoing through the woods as though they were wishing each other good night. Andrea did their voices—"Good night, John-Boy. Good night, Jim-Bob."—explaining to Mallory about *The Waltons*. She bought DVD classics that Mallory had never seen and fed her miniature foil-wrapped peanut butter cups while they watched together on the couch. When Mallory found a giant turkey feather—brown with white stripes—she left it for Andrea under the wiper blade of her Prius.

When Andrea asked her to move in, Mallory said yes.



In September, Mallory transferred from her store in Sterling out to the Speed Stop near Mire Lake, and they celebrated during Andrea's last gig. The orange globe of a harvest moon blazed through the picture windows of a bar overlooking Lake Superior, and after dinner they sat together, drinking with the band. They treated Mallory like one of them, letting her in on all the jokes. When it was time for their set, Andrea wrinkled her nose, downed the last of her sparkling water, and strapped on her nickel-plated horn. Up there on that stage, under a sultry light, she rocked and wailed, her body digging into the music, her fingers flying over the keys. She stomped and riffed and wagged her head. The crowd loved her. During one of her solos—a big, buttery sound that vibrated in Mallory's hips—Andrea began to change. She shed years from her skin—the worry lines, the eye bags, gone, sloughed off. This inner light shone through, and Mallory saw who she really was, how she must have looked when she was twenty-five and filled fresh with an innocence and hope that she could make the world a better place.

Mallory felt that same innocence rising inside of herself—maybe she could get close to someone again. She thought how beautiful Andrea was, not in a sexual way but in a purely human-beingness kind of way. Her spirit, that's what she saw. She fell in love with her as a person, a friend. She wasn't pretending in the beginning. She really did have these feelings.

That night, Mallory decided to tell Andrea about what things were like for her at home and what she and Jarrod had done to escape it. She felt she owed it to her because they were getting close, and because Jarrod had gone to prison. Mallory worried about how her past would affect her chances for a future and getting into a good college. Andrea had listened, and in a boozy haze of nightlife golden glow, Andrea told her, "I am going to take care of you."

And Mallory believed her.